

MEMORIES OF CENTER SQUARE
GRADE SCHOOL
submitted by Phyllis (Brown) Stafford

When I was asked to write a story about my memories of going to school in a “one-room schoolhouse” my mind started racing. There are so many.....

For grades 1-4, I attended school at Center Square and I was so blessed to have been taught by none other than “Miss Dorothy” Orem, who devoted her life to teaching her students. I was much too young at the time to fully appreciate, as I do today, her dedication to her kids. Each one of us was special to her and without exception, we all felt that we had a real friend in “Miss Dorothy”. She was a tiny little lady with a lot of strength of character; someone we could look up to and admire. I will always picture her with her 4” high heels and her pretty suits. She always wore make-up which was really neat, and her hair was always curled and in place. Being from a poor rural area, most of our mothers had no money (or inclination) to wear make-up or have their hair done up pretty. My mother was a beautiful lady but she always wore her hair in some sort of wad away from her face, so seeing Miss Dorothy look so pretty all the time was a pleasant experience and something to look forward to.

Along with Miss Dorothy, my Center Square education involved walking out our long lane to Cogley Cole Road and down to Plum Creek Road where my brothers and I were picked up by Jim Gullion or Floyd Ball in their 1946 Fords. My brothers were dropped off at Plum Creek School (grades 5-8) and I was taken to Center Square (grades 1-4). There were 4 grades in one room with a pot-bellied stove in the middle of the room, a blackboard at the front of the room, and for obvious reasons, 2 outhouses. I’m guessing there were maybe 25 kids in the entire school. Miss Dorothy would always go to the school long before her kids got there and fire up that pot-bellied stove so it was always toasty warm by the time we got there.

My story will begin with my entering the first grade. Looking back on it, I must have been a pretty smug little brat. I was the middle child of seven, so having older brothers and a sister, I had access to their books and their “home schooling”, so by the time I started to school, I could count to 100, knew my ABC’s, could read some of my brother’s readers, write my name....or so I thought....and I was ready to take school on. I turned in my first paper and had spelled my first name Fyllis (being really good in phonics, ya know). Miss Dorothy didn’t lecture me; she just quietly crossed out the “F” and replaced it with “Ph”.....which raised a BIG question in my mind. Not being shy, I confronted her with “how could a ‘P’ sound like ‘F’?? That’s when I learned what ‘Ph’ sounds like. As I progressed through the grades, Miss Dorothy would allow me to teach the grades below me, which was just her little way of getting us to be involved and interested.

One really terrible thing I did....being the brat that I was.....was to pull my baby teeth during school, just so I could make the other girls cringe (and possibly earn the admiration of the boys).

We always packed our lunches, but the Marلمان family had a little general store out by the road, so Joanie Marلمان, Sondra Hyde and I would occasionally go over there for a pop and a bag of potato chips which was something really special to do.

One day there was a terrible storm came up with a lot of strong winds, and I can still picture Miss Dorothy with her little body braced against the door to keep it from blowing in.

She had this Victrola that had to be cranked up so it would play, and every Christmas, she would go wind that thing up and we'd hear Gene Autry sing "Rudolph the Red-nosed Reindeer" and "Frosty the Snowman". Another part of our culture lessons was Charles Noble (I don't remember his official capacity in the county) would come and read poems to us. I can still hear that booming voice read James Whitcomb Riley! And the Health Nurse would come and check everybody for lice! (YUK!). AND OH, VALENTINE'S DAY! Romance in the air.....we'd decorate this big box with hearts and paper lace doilies and put it on a table by Miss Dorothy's desk. Kids would make their own valentines and put in the box to be distributed on Valentine's Day. That was exciting. Of course, we were all loved by everybody else, but hey, it was still fun.

At recess and lunch hour, everybody went outside to play.....I remember softball games, jump rope, games of "Russia" where you'd throw a ball up against the side of the school building and say various verses while you went through a variety of exercises with the ball. None of us were overweight then! I was so fortunate to have grown up during those times. They were hard, but none of us were aware of it, because everybody was in the same boat pretty much. We had just come out of WW II so everybody was struggling to provide for their families.....and some had lost husbands and fathers in the war so times were especially hard for them.

One sad memory was when the Rhinehart brothers drowned near their home in Plum Creek.....they were really nice boys and we all grieved for a long time about that.

In the middle of my 4th grade year, we moved to Vevay and I attended Vevay Elementary, but Miss Dorothy's teaching and motivation had certainly prepared me for the challenge of a bigger school. I have many fond memories of that school as well.

Every once in a while, Miss Dorothy will cross my mind. How lucky I was to have had her for those four years! When I graduated from High School, Sieglitz Jewelry Store gave each senior girl a silver teaspoon. Miss Dorothy bought 5 more matching ones and gave them to me for graduation. I still have them in my cedar chest. I wish kids today could experience what I had. Those memories are worth everything to me, and I was truly blessed to have been raised during that time.

The "Schooldays" exhibit at the Switzerland County Historical Museum will debut on Friday, August 6th during the Vevay Main Street's First Friday Celebration. In addition to the regular daily hours of 10:00 am to 5:00 pm, the museum will be open from 6:00 to 8:00 pm, with free admission during the evening hours. Come see us!

Martha Bladen